

## CHOOSE DIABETES-FRIENDLY FOODS AT RESTAURANTS

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You may be accustomed to eating healthy at home to manage your prediabetes or diabetes, but it can be difficult to make those same healthy choices when eating out. It is often convenient to stop at a drive-thru or order take-out, especially if you have children or a busy schedule. Do you have to choose between convenience and healthy choices in order to keep your blood sugar within an ideal range? Not necessarily. Formal and fast-food restaurants may offer healthy options, but it is important to know what to look for and just as important, what to avoid.

### Make Informed Choices

While scanning restaurant menus, search for keywords. A dish's description often provides insight into its preparation. Look for terms and phrases such as “baked”, “broiled”, “grilled”, “poached”, “roasted”, “steamed”, and “without added butter” while avoiding dishes that contain terms like “fried” or “deep-fried”, “creamed”, or “battered”. These cooking methods are higher in fat and calories and can contain excess sodium. In addition, these cooking methods can have large amounts of carbohydrates, which can cause blood sugar levels to rise.

Try to avoid dishes that contain trans- and saturated fats, which add additional calories. Consuming too much fat often increases insulin resistance, making it difficult to prevent or manage diabetes. Fat can also increase LDL-low-density lipoprotein- cholesterol, also known as “bad cholesterol”. Those with diabetes need to manage their “ABC” which stands for A1c, blood pressure, and cholesterol. Instead of dishes containing fats, look for items that contain more fiber and nutrients. Fiber slows the rise in blood sugar and helps improve cholesterol levels. Following these guidelines, whole grains can be healthy alternatives to white bread; fresh vegetables can replace French-fries, and lean protein might be preferred over fatty red meat.

Many chain restaurants are now required to post their nutritional information on websites or in storefronts. Take advantage of this information to make informed choices. While eating out, set a goal; attempt to keep your meal to 500 calories or fewer. Most people exceed 500 calories regularly while eating out and underestimate how much they ate. In fact, an average adult consumes 836 calories every time they visit a fast-food restaurant. Further, that same adult underestimates what they ate by 175 calories on average. Aim to be different! Ensure you check the nutrition facts and monitor your caloric and carbohydrate intake.

### Swap It Out

Do not be shy in asking your server for healthy substitutions at restaurants. For example, try swapping refined carbohydrates like hamburger buns or French-fries for healthier alternatives such as beans, whole-



Choose diabetes-friendly foods at restaurants.  
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grain rice, or corn. Request items to be prepared with less oil or less high-fat cheese. Ask if the chef has vegetarian specialty dishes that often have fewer calories or request grilled chicken and steamed vegetables over their fried counterparts. Reducing your portions also is an excellent tactic. For example, order an appetizer instead of a main course. Eat your appetizer or entrée slowly, enjoying every bite. Slow eating is one way to help your body recognize when you are full. Ask for a to-go box as soon as you get your meal and set half aside to take home.

Out of the macronutrients that provide your body with energy, carbohydrates have the greatest effect on blood sugar. It is important to lower the intake of carbohydrates to prevent your blood sugar from rising. An easy way to reduce carbohydrates in meals is to remove the bread. Bread or buns can add up to 40-50 grams of carbs to your meal. Instead, substitute lettuce to use as a wrap, or better yet, kindly request that the chef prepare it in this way for you. In addition, ask the server to remove ketchup, relish, barbecue sauce, and other condiments in the dish that are typically high in carbohydrates. When choosing protein, select grilled meats over fried. Choosing dishes with fried chicken instead of grilled chicken could easily add 18 grams of carbs; the breading on this chicken contains more carbohydrates than recommended for a snack!

Beware of hidden items that contain added sugar, salt, and fat. Sugar provides extra calories and may make control of blood sugar difficult. Furthermore, salt and fat can lead to high blood pressure and increase your risk of heart disease. Be cautious with beverages as well, ideally choosing water to drink. Many drinks contain hidden sugars, which can add many calories and carbohydrates to your meal. In addition, items such as some salad dressings and condiments can add significant sugar and sodium to a meal.

### **See the tips below to avoid hidden fat and calories in restaurants:**

**Appetizers:** If you order an appetizer, select ones with ingredients including vegetables, fruit, or fish, all of which contain nutrients and fiber. Avoid fried or breaded appetizers such as cheese sticks, because the breading and oil they are cooked in adds lots of calories.

**Soups:** The healthiest soup choices are broth- or tomato-based soups. Creamed chowder and pureed soups, by definition, contain heavy cream adding calories and saturated fats.

**Bread:** Choose whole-grain bread, breadsticks, and crackers that have less fat and calories than muffins, garlic toast, and croissants. If you can, remove or swap the bread in your meal to create space for more vegetables.

**Salads:** Salads often are the healthiest options at restaurants. The healthiest salads are those with dark, leafy green lettuce or spinach, lots of vegetables in a variety of colors, and low-fat dressing on the side. Try dipping your fork into your dressing for each bite instead of pouring it on, which is an easy way to limit your dressing intake. Healthy add-ons could include nuts, seeds, low-fat cheese such as mozzarella or feta, fresh fruit, fresh vegetables, and grilled protein. Limit high-calorie add-ons such as high-fat cheese, croutons, bacon, and fried onions. Also, remember salads that contain lots of meat and cheese, such as chef and taco salads, are usually high in fat and calories.

**Side dishes:** Side dishes can help you reach your daily vegetable intake recommendation (5-6 servings per day). Steamed or grilled vegetables, salads, brown rice, fresh fruit, or a baked potato (keep the butter and sour cream to a minimum) are often available and healthy options. Limit intake of French-fries, potato chips, mayonnaise-based pasta salads, fried vegetables, and other refined, carb-heavy sides.

**Entrées:** Avoid creamy pasta dishes that contain high-fat meat and cheese; opt for whole-grain pasta with lean protein and lots of vegetables instead. Search for healthy terms when choosing an entrée: baked, broiled, grilled, poached, roasted, and steamed are all good options.

**Desserts:** Make sure to finish your meal before ordering dessert. If you wait long enough for your dinner to settle and decide you have room for dessert, consider eating half and taking some home or sharing a single order with a friend or loved one. Also, you may consider healthier desserts such as fruit, sorbet, or sherbet.

## Important Tips

There are several tips you can try to help follow a healthy eating plan at a restaurant to manage your prediabetes or diabetes better.

1. First, think ahead before eating out. Check the menu for healthy options before going out to eat rather than being surprised and overwhelmed once you arrive. You are more likely to make unhealthy choices when you are hungry or distracted.
2. Drink plenty of water before and during the meal.
3. Before and during eating, remember to eat mindfully by making conscious choices about what you consume and giving your full attention to the process of eating. This can help improve your self-control and prevent overeating.
4. Finally, decide to save some of your meal for another time by taking leftovers home in a container. With preparation and healthy substitutions, you can ensure that meals away from home are as nutritious as those prepared at home.

Remember, just because you are eating at a restaurant does not mean you have to eat unhealthy foods! There are always things we can do to make sure we are eating healthy no matter where we are to prevent or manage diabetes. Overall, it is important to focus on lifestyle changes such as increasing physical activity and eating healthy instead of specific diets. Restrictive diets can lead to weight loss but are typically unsustainable. Make sure to talk with a doctor or dietician before starting any diet that severely restricts calories or a main nutrient.

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